

"It takes no stretch of the intellect to know there are three pillars which support the rostrum from which springs the conduct of youngsters as they grow to adulthood: Home, Church and School. Mothers and fathers, ministers, rabbis, priests, principals and teachers must construct within the minds and hearts of children an impenetrable moral shield, against which the blandishments of peers, the enticements of the mean streets, clannish cliques, and visual and aural images, will shatter and break. But absent that moral shield, absent the loving embrace of Parents, Church and School, absent the early years' learning of right and wrong , no abolition of constitutional rights, no executive order, no congressional law, no fiery rhetoric will ever salvage a child's conduct or locate a missing moral core. If we, as a nation, don't understand that, we are lost"

A statement of principles and
beliefs of the member companies of the
Motion Picture Association of America
which contribute to the goal of
making our schools safer and our children safe

presented by

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before the
Senate Commerce Committee

in Washington D. C.
on May 4, 1999

What happened at Columbine High School in Colorado was a senseless act of mindless malice. Every sane American recoils in horror. There is rage in the land. There are outcries to ban, abolish, and quarantine by legislative fiat what many believe to be source beds of fatal mischief. But we have to be clearheaded in our response to the query: How does this nation make our schools proof against such grotesque intrusions?

Some cruel questions:

What ghoulis molecules infected two teen-agers, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb in 1924, seventy-five years ago, to callously kidnap, torture and murder fourteen-year old Bobby Franks?

What bred the inhumanity in teen-ager Charles Starkweather who in 1951, forty-eight years ago, with his fourteen year old girlfriend, roamed across Nebraska and Wyoming shooting, stabbing and strangling eleven people. Caril Fugate, his girlfriend, confessed she shotgunned her own mother. Caitlin Lovinger reported in the New York TIMES (April 23, 1999) that hours before Starkweather was strapped in an electric chair, he was asked if he would like his eyes donated for medical research. "Hell no," he said, "no one ever did anything for me. Why should I do anything for anyone else?"

What was the dark force that invaded teen-ager Kenneth Skinner and caused him in 1952, forty-seven years ago, to burn down an apartment building that was on his paper route. He casually admitted later then he knew none of the eight people who died in the blaze?

What compassionless evil prompted Charles Whitman to climb the Tower at the University of Texas in 1966, thirty-three years ago, and without mercy gaze down the sight of his rifle to shoot fifteen innocent people to death?

Wherein lie the roots of the madness of Starkweather, Skinner, Fugate, Whitman, Leopold and Loeb? Do they have any connection to the unfathomable urgings which infected the brains of the kid killers at Columbine?

**Kid killers are inhabited by dismal rhythms
and mental disconnects.**

One doesn't have to be a medical seer to understand that youngsters who kill, wantonly, casually, are inhabited by dismal rhythms which dance in an emotional bubble perilously off-center. There is within them a mental disconnect swarming with dark and primitive transactions. Unhappily, no one knew that behind the fresh faces of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold lurked the picture of Dorian Gray. Why did not anyone sense that these two seemingly non-violent youths were seething with hatred, on the edge of detonation, even though it was writ clear and large they were in terrible emotional disarray?

But when something incomprehensible like Columbine occurs, fear is infectious. In a NEWSWEEK poll last week, 64% of adults believed a shooting incident at their local schools to be "very likely" to "somewhat likely." But factually in 1996 only ten percent of schools reported even one serious violent crime.

The statistics are revelatory. Fewer than one percent of homicides involving School-age children occur in and around schools, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Since 1992 the annual death toll from School shootings has ranged from twenty to fifty-five, says the National School Safety Center. There were forty-nine deaths in the last School year. Forty-three percent of all schools had no crime at all in the 1996-1997 School year, said the Department of Education. In 1997, eight percent of high School students said they had carried a weapon to School in the preceding month. This was a decrease from the twelve percent in 1993.

In 1997, the murder rate in the USA was the lowest in thirty years. The juvenile violent arrest rate rose between 1988 and 1994, but peaked in 1994, and since then has decreased steadily. The FBI reports that the number of persons under eighteen in the U.S. is some 70 million. The rate of arrests for violent crimes in this category has declined from its high water mark in 1994 at .51% to .41% or forty-one hundredth of one percent (287,000). This also means that 99.59% of young people under eighteen (69.7 million) were not into violent crime.

The children of this country do not deserve being all herded into a category that labels them as something they are not. They are not all killers. They are not all brooding, menacing figures, filled with hatreds, emotional abnormalities which house a defective mythology. Though all children more or less inhabit the same entertainment and community enclaves, ninety-nine percent of them are decently formed good citizens.

Yes, I know that statistics are frail reeds on which to lean, but they ought not be ignored. Yes, it is absolutely true that one death is too many. Columbine happened. The nation weeps.

Now we have an overpowering responsibility, as a nation, to make our schools safer.

**How can we as parents
and citizens contribute to
making our schools safer and our children safe?**

It takes no stretch of the intellect to know beyond doubt there are three pillars which support the rostrum from which springs the conduct of youngsters as they grow to adulthood. They are Home, Church and School. These are the central nervous systems of a child's future behavior. Neither Presidents nor Congress nor regulatory agencies can substitute for the three essential imperatives through which children are molded, Home, Church and School.

Mothers, fathers, ministers, rabbis, priests, principals and teachers must construct within the minds and hearts of children an impenetrable moral shield, against which the blandishments of peers, the enticements of the mean streets, clannish cliques, and visual and aural images, will shatter and break. That moral armor plate has to be woven from a clear understanding of what is right and what is wrong, founded on Cod's inviolate commandments (which are pretty much the same in every religion). If that moral armor is sturdily assembled, and fitted in the early years, no momentary lapse will dissolve its bindings.

But absent that moral shield, absent the loving embrace parents, church and School, absent the early years' learning of right and wrong, no abolition of constitutional rights, no executive order, no congressional law, no fiery rhetoric will ever salvage a child's conduct or locate a missing moral core. **If we as a nation don't understand that, we are lost.**

WHAT IS RIGHT AND
WHAT IS PLAINLY WRONG:

Education experts assert that the most sensitive time span in the life of a child is in the first seven or eight years. That is the period when the child's character is shaped and formed, perhaps forever. Yet it is in those sensitive early years where most of us lag in inserting an ethical code within our children, barren of which youngsters grow up with a threadbare morality. Why not, then, beginning in pre-School, moving through kindergarten and grades one through five, for at least one half hour each day, teach children how to live a life both decent and worthy? Why not summon the best minds in education and child behavior to construct a course which could be called **WHAT IS RIGHT AND WHAT IS PLAINLY WRONG?** (In high School or college this course would doubtless be labeled "Ethics" or "Moral Judgments.")

All religions are anchored to the same moral platform. What is wrong in one religion is usually wrong in another. Therefore there ought be no barriers to the teaching of a course that is not religious, in the constitutional sense, but is the seedbed from which flows a firm and fluent embrace of life-giving essentials: honor, duty, compassion, sacrifice, decency, integrity, self-worth, civic values and, above all, the cleansing precept that one should treat others as one wants others to treat him or her. If we squander this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to insert in the child that indispensable moral code which will guide him through an uncertain future, we will have blundered, badly. As someone wrote: "When error is irretrievable, there can be no repentance." If such a course were to be put in place, I would ask

the member companies of MPAA, and others in the creative community, to help produce brief videos which would personalize the examples offered in the course.

EARLY WARNING SIGNALS:

Early warning alerts given off by disturbed children must be heard and countered immediately. They cannot be dismissed. The schools have experts, or ought to have, whose alarm bells clang when troubled students come into view.

Parents have to be watchful for problematical behavior in their children. When those kids are inadvertently crying out for help before they walk off the edge of the precipice, parents cannot be dismissive, cannot remain mute and blind. They must contact diagnostic experts before it is too late.

The Department of Education in August, 1998 has published a most important document titled **Guide to Safe Schools**. This Guide is signed and sponsored by Richard Riley, Secretary of Education and Janet Reno, Attorney General, and its substance was supplied by experts in education, law enforcement, juvenile justice, mental health and other social service. This Guide demands to be examined for it verifies **Early Warning Signals**, which every parent ought to read and absorb. These early warning signs are:

"Social withdrawal; excessive feelings of isolation and being alone; affiliation with gangs; inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms; excessive feelings of rejection; being a victim of violence; feelings of being picked on and persecuted; low school interest and poor academic performance; expression of violence in writings and drawings; uncontrolled

anger; patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting; intimidating, and bullying behavior; history of disciplinary problems; past history of violent and aggressive behavior; intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes; drug use.

It is a must-read for parents, school teachers, principals, and clerics. It is also a recipe for saving a child's life, as well as saving the lives of those with whom disturbed young children associate.

The movie/TV industry can be of assistance by helping to distribute the Early Warning Signals. It is a venture that we would be willing to discuss with the Department of Education.

Accusatory fingers point toward movies

Let's discuss movies. Accusatory fingers point toward films as a prime villain. Last year the entire movie industry produced over 550 films. When that many movies are made, some of them are bound to be slovenly conceived. In a free society, no one can command 'only good movies be produced.' Which is why I will not defend all movies. Some few in my judgment cross a smudged, ill-illuminated line where the acceptable becomes unsuitable, and I'll have no part of them. the great majority of films, some of them rising to the highest point to which the creative spirit can soar, don't warrant being lumped with a number of movies whose worth is questionable. Edmund Burke was right when he said, "You cannot indict an entire society." Neither should anyone condemn the many because of the porous quality of the very few. Moreover, American parents have the supreme right not to patronize what they judge to be soiling to their childrens' future. The parental

bill of rights declares the power of parents to turn away from that which they don't want their family to listen to or watch. Banish them from your home, refuse to patronize them outside

**The movie/TV industry has an obligation
to be responsible**

I do earnestly believe that the movie/TV industry has a solemn obligation. Each creative team must examine their work from a personal perspective. Is there gratuitous violence, language or sensuality? If there is, then the creative team, on its own, without any nagging or commands from anyone else, ought to exile whatever is gratuitous without dismaying the dramatic narrative that is the core of the story. I wholeheartedly endorse that kind of creative scrutiny.

Years ago many of us in the movie world came to the conclusion that we had a duty to inform parents about film content. This is the prime reason why for over thirty years a voluntary movie rating system, created and implemented by film producers and theater owners, has been in place. These ratings give advance cautionary warnings to parents so they can decide what movies they want their children to see or not to see. Only parents are capable of making such decisions. Some 75% of parents with children under thirteen find this rating system Very Useful to Fairly Useful in helping them guide their childrens' movie viewing.

A comparable rating system is operative in television, offering information to parents about TV shows. Soon, there will be available in large supply the so-called V-Chip whose aim it is to give parents more power over the TV viewing of their children.

Parents have to tend to their children's TV viewing, seriously, tenaciously, else they cannot indict others for their lack of monitoring TV watching in the home. For example, too many parents are agreeing to give their young children their own TV set, in their own room, thereby losing control over what their children are watching. But that is a parental decision they alone can make.

The movie industry has played, and is playing, an important role in our society, and will continue to do so. American movies travel the world, where they are hospitably received and enthusiastically patronized. Our movies, from Mr. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON to SAVING PRIVATE RYAN, from BEN HUR to STAR WARS, captivate audiences everywhere. Entertainment created in America is one of this nation's proudest artistic and commercial assets. We produce for this country huge amounts of surplus balance of trade at a time when the country bleeds from trade deficits. (It is ironic that Japan, which devours American films and TV programs, has one of the lowest crime rates in the world!)

Listen to the children

We (meaning parents and citizens, Congress, White House, professionals in the field of education, science and business) should listen to the children, the youngsters in grammar school, middle school and high school. They are best equipped to tell us if the media is the complete villain, if what they hear and see infects them, and soils their best intentions. They know better than their elders about peer pressure and rejection and cliques and the mean alternatives that tantalize and entice them. Are we truly listening to them?

On Thursday, April 29, 1999, Jeff Greenfield (CNN) had a 'conversation' with students. Two of those students were from Columbine High School. One of them, a lovely senior named Alisha Basore, was queried about the impact of the media on unnatural behavior. She responded that the media was a minor force in distorting students' values. If the media was at fault, she said, everyone of the some 1,850 students at Columbine would all be killers because, as she pointed out, the students all watch the same movies and TV programs, listen to the same music, play the same video games. By her side was the other Columbine student, Josh Nielsen, who confirmed Alisha's remarks and said it wasn't the media, but rather that the two killers were crazy.

Let's listen to the children.

Why kids go wrong
is full of complexities and contradictions.
There is no 'one thing.'

As we debate and discuss the phenomenon of 'killer kids' we have to understand there are areas in the human brain which even the most advanced medical skills have not yet been able to penetrate. We just don't know the 'why.' There is no one element in the society, no one thing that if revised, would be 'the solution' to societal violence. It is all so very complicated, so complex, because we are dealing with the human condition which is unknowable in so many ways. Just as it is true that computers can do everything except one thing: they cannot accurately predict human behavior. Though we ache for it, there is no Euclidian geometry with its simple clarity available to us in our search for quick answers when youngsters explode and others die.

But we ought not leap to conclusions without verifiable evidence and professional guidance. The Department of Education/Attorney General's GUIDE TO SAFE SCHOOLS has peered deeply into the problem and concluded that Early Warnings must be observed and acted on with urgency. Additionally, the Surgeon General can build on this Guide by enlisting the finest professionals in the land who know best how to navigate and map the dimly lit corridors of the human mind. From that assembly of the most knowledgeable must come evidence, not theory, not tenuous links, not opinion, not personal view, not surmise, but confirmable evidence.

It is these men and women of medical science and education on whom we should rely to provide us with real facts. And then the great majority of citizens can act wisely and prudently, not wildly axing that which ought not be dismantled.

We should heed the words of Oliver Goldsmith who, in discussing what he called 'the good natured man', wrote: "We must touch his weaknesses with a delicate hand. There are some faults so nearly allied to excellence that we can scarce weed out the fault without eradicating the virtue."

There is a long road ahead, but the goal is reachable. It will require all factions and elements in the society to be involved. The movie/TV industry is ready to be part of a national crusade to make our schools safer and our children safe.